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An Introductory Discourse, delivered before the Literary and Philosophical Society of New-York, on the fourth of May, 1814. By De Witt Clinton, L. L. D. President of the Literary and Philosophical Society of New-York, &c. New-York; Published by David Longworth, at the Shakespeare Gallery. N. Van Riper, Print. 1815. Octavo, pp. 148.

This discourse and its accompaniments occupies 148 octavo pages, closely printed with a small type; and if it were published in the style of modern English printing, with large types and wide spaces, would form a volume of five hundred pages. It would require a wonderful combination of talents to do it justice, such a combination as we can hardly hope for, when arrived at maturity; but now, being in our infancy, if we were able to treat this work according to the rules of art, it would be a labour in our cradle, that would be ominous to all monsters hereafter. Every subject is touched upon, literature, law, physick, and divinity, natural history in all its ramifications, horticulture, agriculture, legislation, and political economy. The notes are equally miscellaneous, and embrace every subject from Indian fables about mammoth bones, to translations of the piscatory eclogues of Sannazarius, by Dr. Mitchell. Now if all this had proceeded from a regular professor, we should have prepared all the weapons of criticism, for the perpetrator; because every man who has made the attempt, knows that there is little difficulty in accumulating a confused mass of discordant materials, and still less in supporting them by even as great a chaos of pedantry, as was exhibited in the 'Pursuits of Literature;' but to condense learning in a discourse, with unity, simplicity, and harmony—*hoc opus hic labor est*. A German toyman might carve and dress 'Our Lady of Loretto;' a different talent was required, to produce the Venus de Medicis. The great art is to abbreviate, polish, and refine, not to accumulate; which may be illustrated by the answer of an eminent person in this vicinity, to one of his parishioners, who complained to him, that his sermons were too long, *I know it*, said he, *but I have not time to make them shorter*.

We have made these remarks to shew we were not blind to the defects of this performance ; that we might have a fairer opportunity to express our respect for the talents and exertions of the author, in the support of science. He, perhaps, may not be able, entirely, to repel the charge of ostentation ; but we are sincerely disposed to attribute this work to different motives, to a wish of exciting every class of his hearers, to undertake the labours before them ; and by pointing out how much was wanted ; that men of the most different taste and acquirements, might find, in the vast variety, some branch to suit them. It was, besides, a discourse to a new society, whose objects seem, indeed, too miscellaneous to admit of very great success, unless divided into distinct classes, and they might, perhaps, expect that some allusion should be made to each of their objects. We feel too much satisfaction, when we find a man like Mr. Clinton, reclaimed from the ordinary routine of politicks ; to occupy himself in advancing the liberal and beneficent purposes of science and literature, not to congratulate him for his good fortune, and to hail him with respect. He was once a persecutor, and (as he possessed both talents and principle) in due time a martyr. If, without abandoning high and enlarged views of politicks, he will devote some of the energy and weight of his character, to the cause he has here espoused, he will render a service to his state, that will be remembered, when even the names of the mean factions that now disgrace it, are forgotten.

A considerable portion of this discourse, is occupied in the investigation of the causes, that have hitherto impeded, and of those which may hereafter promote learning in this country, particularly in the state of New-York. This is now a favourite topick, we shall, therefore, select some passages from this part of the address, which will be a specimen of his style, and his mode of thinking on this subject.

‘ Ancient migrations were generally the offspring of want.
‘ Sometimes a whole people departed for their natal soil,
‘ and sought for better destinies in a milder climate and a
‘ more prolifick land. Sometimes, when population became
‘ surcharged, and subsistence difficult, a portion of a nation would change its habitation : at other times, colonies
‘ were planted for the purpose of retaining conquered countries, and checking the predatory incursions of barbarian
‘ hordes. A different principle seems to have led to the

‘ first colonization of America. The discovery of this
‘ western world appears to have infused a new spirit into
‘ Europe : the imaginations of men were dazzled, with fabu-
‘ lous stories of dorados, or mountains of gold, and of foun-
‘ tains by which the human race flourished in immortal
‘ youth. In this land the god of wealth was supposed to
‘ have erected his temples, and his votaries flocked from all
‘ quarters to propitiate his blessings. When experience
‘ had sobered the distempered fancies of these adventurers,
‘ and had convinced them of their delusion, they still dis-
‘ covered that, although the precious metals were not within
‘ their grasp, yet that their cupidity could be amply grati-
‘ fied by the abundant products of the soil. The settlement
‘ of this country was thus made with a view to the acqui-
‘ sition of wealth ; knowledge was out of the question. The
‘ attachments of the emigrants, like their origin, were exotic ;
‘ the land of their adoption was considered as secondary
‘ and inferior, in every respect, to the land of their nativity ;
‘ and their anxious eyes were constantly directed to the
‘ period when they could return to their native soil laden
‘ with the bounties of the new world. This country was
‘ also planted at a time when the intellectual world was in-
‘ volved in cimmerian darkness. The scholastic philosophy
‘ was the reigning knowledge of the times ;—a philosophy
‘ of words and notions, conversant only in logical distinc-
‘ tions, abstractions, and subtleties ; which left real science
‘ wholly uncultivated to hunt after occult qualities, abstract
‘ notions, and objects of impertinent curiosity. This sys-
‘ tem, which was founded by the commentators on Aristot-
‘ le, who were called profound, irrefragable, and angelic
‘ doctors, corrupted every department of knowledge and
‘ maintained its supremacy for several centuries. The sta-
‘ gyrite was even considered as entitled to the honours of
‘ an evangelist ; and Melancthon complains that his ethics
‘ were read to the people, instead of the gospel, in sacred
‘ assemblies. In this great serbonian bog the human mind
‘ lay ingulfed, entranced, and bewildered for ages ; and the
‘ glimmering rays of light which the peripatetic philosophy
‘ shed over the world, were confined to the cloister and the
‘ college. At this period this country was first settled by
‘ the countrymen indeed of Erasmus and of Grotius ; but
‘ the works of Erasmus were locked up in latin ;—Grotius
‘ was scarcely known, and few of our ancestors were ac-

‘ acquainted with the first elements of knowledge. They settled here under the auspices of a dutch west-india company, and when the province was surrendered to the english, in 1674, no advantages resulted to the cause of knowledge. Charles II. was a witty sensualist—James II. was a contracted bigot—William of Orange was a mere soldier. The constellation of intellectual luminaries which shone in the augustan age of England diffused but little light across the Atlantic: the two first of the Brunswick kings had neither knowledge themselves, nor did they value it in others; and with the third dynasty we measured swords, and a severance of the empire ensued.

‘ There is something in the nature of provincial government which tends to engender faction, and to prevent the expansion of intellect. It inevitably creates two distinct interests; one regarding the colony as subservient in every respect to the mother country, and the other rising up in opposition to this assumption. The governor and principal magistrates, who derive their appointments from an extrinsic source, feel independent of the people over whom they are placed. The operation of this principle has been powerfully experienced in our territorial governments, which have been the constant theatre of intestine divisions; and when the human mind is called away from the interest of science to aid, by its faculties, the agitations of party, little can be expected from energies thus perverted and abused. The annals of our colonial state present a continual controversy between the ministers of the crown, and the representatives of the people. What did the governor and judges care for a country where they were strangers? where their continuance was transient; and to which they were attached by no tie that reaches the human heart. Their offices emanated from another country;—to that source they looked for patronage and support, to that alone their views extended; and having got, what Archimedes wanted, another world on which to erect their engines they governed this at pleasure.

‘ The colonial governors were, generally speaking, little entitled to respect. They were delegated to this country not as men qualified to govern, but as men whose wants drove them into exile; not as men entitled by merit to their high eminence, but as men who owed it to the solicitations of powerful friends and to the influence of court

‘ intrigue. Thus circumstanced and thus characterized, is
‘ it wonderful to find them sometimes patrolling the city
‘ disguised in female dress ; at other times assailing the
‘ representatives of the people with the most virulent
‘ abuse, and defrauding the province by the most despic-
‘ able acts of peculation ; and at all times despising know-
‘ ledge and overlooking the public prosperity ? Justice,
‘ however, requires that we should except from this cen-
‘ sure Hunter and Burnet. Hunter was a man of wit, a
‘ correspondent of Swift, and a friend of Addison. Bur-
‘ net, the son of the celebrated bishop of Salisbury, was
‘ devoted to literature ; they were the best governors that
‘ ever presided over the colony.

‘ The love of fame is the most active principle of our
‘ nature. To be honoured when living,—to be venerated
‘ when dead,—is the parent source of those writings which
‘ have illuminated,—of those actions which have benefited
‘ and dazzled mankind. All that poetry has created, that
‘ philosophy has discovered, that heroism has performed,
‘ may be principally ascribed to this exalted passion. True
‘ it is,

“ When fame’s loud trump hath blown its noblest blast,
Though long the sound, the echo sleeps at last ;
And glory, like the phoenix ’midst her fires,
Exhales her odours, blazes, and expires.”

LORD BYRON.

‘ Yet, as long as man is susceptible of sublime emotions,
‘ so long will he commit himself to this master feeling of a
‘ noble nature. What would have become of the sublime
‘ work of Milton, if he had written for the fifteen pounds
‘ which he received from the bookseller ; and where would
‘ have been the writings of Bacon, if he had not aspired to
‘ immortal fame ? “ My name and memory,” said this prince
‘ of philosophers in his will, “ I leave to foreign nations, and
‘ to my own countrymen after some time be passed over.”
‘ When with one hand he demolished the philosophy of the
‘ schools, and with the other erected a magnificent temple
‘ dedicated to truth and genuine knowledge, he was ani-
‘ mated in his progress, and cheered in his exertions by the
‘ persuasion that after ages would erect an imperishable
‘ monument to his fame.

‘ But in order that this passion may have its full scope
‘ and complete operation it is not only necessary that there
‘ should be a proper subject, but a suitable place and an
‘ enlightened public. The actor, in order to act well his
‘ part, must have a good theatre and a respectable audience.
‘ Would Demosthenes and Cicero have astonished mankind
‘ by their oratory, if they had spoken in Sparta or in Car-
‘ thage? would Addison have written his Spectators in
‘ Kamtschatka, or Locke his work on the Understanding at
‘ Madrid? destroy the inducement to act, take away the
‘ capacity to judge, and annihilate the value of applause,
‘ and poetry sinks into dulness; philosophy loses its power
‘ of research; and eloquence evaporates into froth and
‘ mummery.

‘ A provincial government, like ours before the revolu-
‘ tion, was entirely incompetent to call into activity this en-
‘ nobling propensity of our nature. A small population,
‘ scattered over an extensive country, and composed almost
‘ entirely of strangers to literature; a government deriva-
‘ tive and dependent, without patronage and influence, and
‘ in hostility to the public sentiment; a people divided into
‘ political and religious parties, and a parent country watch-
‘ ing all their movements with a stepmother’s feelings, and
‘ keeping down their prosperity with the arm of power,
‘ could not be expected to produce those literary worthies
‘ who have illuminated the other hemisphere.

‘ History justifies the remark that free governments, al-
‘ though happier in themselves, are as oppressive to their
‘ provinces as despotic ones. It was a common saying in
‘ Greece that a free man in Sparta was the freest man; and
‘ a slave, the greatest slave in the world. This remark
‘ may be justly applied to the ancient republics which had
‘ provinces under their controul. The people of the parent
‘ country were free, and those remote were harassed with
‘ all kinds of exactions, borne down by the high hand of
‘ oppression, and under the subjection of a military despo-
‘ tism. The colonial system of modern times is equally
‘ calculated to build up the mother country on the depres-
‘ sion of its colonies. That all their exports shall go to,
‘ and all their imports be derived from it, is the fundamen-
‘ tal principle. Admitting occasional departures from this
‘ system, is it possible that an infant country, so bandaged
‘ and cramped, could attain to that maturity of growth

‘ which is essential to the promotion and encouragement of
‘ literature? Accordingly we do not find in any colony of
‘ modern times any peculiar devotion to letters, or any ex-
‘ traordinary progress in the cultivation of the human mind.
‘ The most fertile soil,—the most benign climate,—all that
‘ nature can produce and art can perfect, are incompetent
‘ to remove the benumbing effects, which a provincial and
‘ dependent position operates upon the efforts of genius.

‘ These difficulties, so embarrassing, were augmented from
‘ other causes. The population of this colony was derived
‘ from several nations. The original emigrants were dutch.
‘ The next in order of time were from England. The
‘ revocation of the edict of Nantz, and the persecutions in
‘ the Palatinate, occasioned considerable migrations from
‘ France and Germany ; Scotland and Ireland also furnished
‘ a great accession of inhabitants. Four different languages
‘ were for a long time used ; and the people were separated
‘ from each other by a diversity of manners and opinions,
‘ and strong national prejudices. How, then, was it possible
‘ to combine their energies in any common effort? Two
‘ centuries have not entirely extinguished the lines of na-
‘ tional separation. The dutch and german languages are
‘ still spoken in some settlements. Five or six generations
‘ have, in a great measure, amalgamated these discordant
‘ elements. National antipathies have subsided, a national
‘ character has been formed, and a national physiognomy is
‘ supposed to be established. The triumph and general
‘ adoption of the english language have been the principal
‘ means of melting us down into one people, and of extin-
‘ guishing those stubborn prejudices and violent animosities
‘ which formed a wall of partition between the inhabitants
‘ of the same land. In a country whose population was
‘ thus composed, it was not to be expected that a great
‘ taste for literature would be considered an essential accom-
‘ paniment.’

‘ Mental, in many cases, acts directly the reverse of
‘ corporeal vision ; and magnifies objects, not in proportion
‘ to their propinquity but in the ratio of their distance. This
‘ obliquity of the human mind springs from a variety of
‘ causes, and operates in a variety of directions. It inces-
‘ santly magnifies the talents and morals of the past, at the
‘ expense of the present times ; and its wanderings never
‘ appear in a more striking view than in its judgments of

‘men. By its magic influence the dwarf of antiquity starts up into a giant ; and, like the phenomenon called the Mirage, it translates the men and the things of this earth to the skies. These remarks are made, not to depreciate those who have gone before us, but to warn us not to depreciate ourselves. The panegyrics which have been pronounced upon the works of some of our predecessors appear strange, when we consider their writings with an unprejudiced mind ; and, perhaps, the same observation may, without arrogance, be applied to many of the divines, the physicians, the jurists, and the statesmen whose praises have reached us through the organ of tradition, and whose memories have descended to us adorned with the laurels of genius : but let not this discourage exertion :—what they are to us ! many of you will deservedly be to future generations ; and the pious feelings of posterity may cherish your worth with equal ardour and embalm you in their hearts with equal affection.

‘The spring which was given to the human mind ; the improvement which seminaries of education produced ; and the general, extensive, and augmented popularity of intellectual illumination, paved the way for those political discussions which ushered in the american revolution, and finally dismembered the british empire. The study of the law as a liberal profession, necessarily leads to investigations with regard to the origin of government, the constitutions of states, and the objects of jurisprudence. The influence of this profession upon the political events of the times could not escape the sagacity of Burke : he assigns it as one of the causes of the revolution. “This study,” says he, “render men acute, inquisitive, dexterous, prompt in attack, ready in defence, full of resources. In other countries the people, more simple and of a less mercurial cast, judge of an ill principle in government by an actual grievance : here they anticipate the evil, and judge of the pressure of the grievance by the badness of the principle ; they augur misgovernment at a distance, and snuff the approach of tyranny in every tainted breeze.”*

‘The statesmen who appeared at the dawn of the revolution attracted the admiration of Europe ; and the mas-

* ‘Speech on conciliation with America.’

terly state papers which our state convention, and the general congress promulgated, breathed the genius of Greece and the invincible spirit of Rome; and covered with glory the american name. "When," said the elder Pitt, "when your lordships look at the papers transmitted us from America;—when you consider their decency, firmness, and wisdom, you cannot but respect their cause and wish to make it your own. For myself I must declare and avow, that in all my reading and observation,—and it has been my favourite study, (I have read Thucydides, and have studied and admired the master states of the world,) that, for solidity of reasoning, force of sagacity, and wisdom of conclusion, under such a complication of difficult circumstances, no nation or body of men can stand in preference to the general congress at Philadelphia."*

But, although there is a vast mass of knowledge spread over the state, yet it is, generally speaking, of the common kind: all know the elementary parts of instruction, but few know the higher branches of science; and there is not so much concentrated knowledge in so many individuals, as in Europe. This arises from a number of causes which do not disparage our intellectual character, and which, it is to be hoped, will cease to operate after a short time.

In the first place we have, with scarcely any intermission, been distracted by party spirit! in its bitterest forms of exacerbation. Our ingenuity has been employed, not in cultivating a vernacular literature, or in increasing the stock of human knowledge; but in raising up and pulling down the parties which agitate the community. This violent spirit has split society asunder, has poisoned the intercourse of private life, has spread a morbid gloom over our literature, has infected the national taste, and has palsied the general prosperity. Whatever apologies may be made for these political discussions, by ascribing them to an honest difference in opinion, there can be none offered for the style and manner in which they are conducted. In reading the classical works of the ancients we are astonished at the violations of decorum which appear in their most polite and accomplished authors; who frequently use expressions that no modern writer dare adopt

* 'Speech on a motion to remove the troops from Boston.'

‘without the certainty of condemnation. But if we excel
‘the ancients in this respect, we are far behind them in
‘other branches of literary good morals. The style of our
‘political writings has assumed a character of rude invective,
‘and unrestrained licentiousness, unparalleled in any
‘other part of the world ; and which has greatly tended to
‘injure our national character. This has principally arisen
‘from the indiscriminate applause that has been conferred
‘upon certain eminent political writers. We imitate what
‘we are taught to admire ; and unfortunately we have aped
‘their boldness of invective, and fierceness of denunciation,
‘without exhibiting those fascinations of genius, which
‘operate like the cestus of Venus ; conceal deformity, and
‘heighten all the charms of beauty and grace. Junius
‘arose in the literary, like a comet in the natural world,
‘menacing pestilence and war ; and denouncing, in a style
‘of boldness and invective before unknown and unheard of,
‘the constituted authorities of Great Britain. When we
‘analyze his writings, we find no extraordinary power of
‘imagination,—no uncommon extent of erudition,—no remarkable
‘solidity of reasoning. His topics are few ; but
‘he was master of his subject. He possessed, in a singular
‘degree, the *vivida vis animi* :* his conceptions were
‘distinct and luminous, and he expressed them with peculiar
‘point and sententious compression ; but the polished
‘keenness of his invective too often degenerated into vulgar
‘scurrility. His importance was greatly enhanced by the
‘mystery which surrounded his person,—the panic which
‘followed his denunciations,—and the celebrity which was
‘attached to his literary antagonists. He created a new
‘era in political writing ; his works have become the archetypal
‘type and the text book of political authors ; and every
‘juvenile writer, who enters the political lists, endeavours
‘to bend the bow of Ulysses ; and, in striving to make up in
‘venom what he wants in vigour mistakes scurrility for
‘satire, ribaldry for wit, and confounds the natron of Egypt
‘with the salt of Attica.’

‘The nature of our government and the constitution of
‘our confederacy, are admirably adapted to promote the
‘interests of science. Free governments are the native
‘soil of great talents. “ Though a republic should be bar-

* ‘*Lucretius*.’

‘barous,” says Hume, “it necessarily, by an infallible operation, gives rise to law even before mankind have made any considerable advances in the other sciences; from law arises security; from security curiosity, and from curiosity knowledge.”* That most profound political writer, whom I have just quoted, with the vast volume of history before his eyes, and aided by all the powers of an analyzing and investigating mind, has laid down the following incontrovertible propositions in relation to the influence of government upon the arts and sciences.

‘1. It is impossible for the arts and sciences to arise, at first, among any people unless that people enjoy the blessing of a free government.

‘2. Nothing is more favourable to the rise of politeness, and learning, than a number of neighbouring and independent states connected together by commerce and policy.

‘3. Though the only proper nursery for these valuable plants be a free government, yet may they be transplanted into any government; and a republic is most favourable to the growth of the sciences, a civilized monarchy to that of the polite arts.†

‘Although this was published more than half a century ago, yet it suits our situation so precisely that one would suppose the writer had the United States fully in his view. Perhaps the flourishing condition of the literature of Europe is, in a great degree, owing to the division of that continent into a number of independent states. Each capital is a place where letters are encouraged, and the different governments vie with each other in rewarding the effusions of genius; but if Charles V., Lewis XIV., or Napoleon, had succeeded in establishing an universal monarchy the dark ages of gothic barbarity would have revisited mankind. Thus, under the direction of an all-wise and beneficent God, the half-civilized serf of Russia has become the unconscious guardian and protector of knowledge. The small country of Attica, not so large as Long-Island, can never be contemplated without the mingled emotions of veneration and sorrow. “Ab Athenis enim humanitas, doctrina, religio, fruges, jura, leges, ortæ, atque in omnes terras distributa, putantur.” “It is acknowledged,” said

* ‘Hume’s Essays, vol. 1. 14th Essay.’

† ‘Ibid.’

‘Cicero, “that literature, polite arts, religion, agriculture, laws, and social rights, originated in Athens and were thence distributed over all nations.” The fertility of the soil, the excellence of the climate, the freedom of the government, and the enterprising spirit of the people, must have coöperated in producing this transcendent and pre-eminent state of human exaltation. And if a comparison was instituted in those respects, between that country and ours, in what important part would we be deficient?’

‘We are, perhaps, more favoured in another point of view. Attica was peopled from Egypt; but we can boast of our descent from a superior stock. I speak not of families or dynasties; I refer to our origin from those nations where civilization, knowledge, and refinement have erected their empire; and where human nature has attained its greatest perfection. Annihilate Holland, Great Britain, Ireland, France, and Germany, and what would become of civilized man? this country, young as it is, would be the great Atlas remaining to support the dignity of the world: and perhaps our mingled descent from various nations may have a benign influence upon genius. We perceive the improving effects of an analogous state upon vegetables and inferior animals. The extraordinary characters which the United States have produced may be, in some measure, ascribed to the mixed blood of so many nations flowing in our veins; and it may be confidently predicted that the operation of causes, acting with irresistible effect, will carry in this country all the improvable faculties of human nature to the highest state of perfection.’

In page 31, speaking of serpents, he remarks that ‘the rattlesnake, not being able to exist in the neighbourhood of swine, has fled from the cultivated country.’ That the rattlesnake has left the country is generally true; but there are some exceptions in this part of it at least; we recollect that two rattlesnakes were taken alive, only five miles from Boston a few years since, and that others have been occasionally killed in the same neighbourhood. In page 36, speaking of that destructive disease, consumption, he gives some extracts from the bills of mortality to shew the extent of its ravages. It is also a general opinion that it is much more frequent than formerly. May this not be owing to variations in the medical nomenclature? Do not some dis-

orders, that terminate in a short and rapid consumption, pass by this last name, though only the consequence and closing form in other diseases; at least these bills of mortality are too much at variance with each other to be taken as an authority. For instance, Mr. Clinton cites the return of 1813, which gives the following result in four towns. In Boston the deaths by consumption amount to about one fourth of the whole number; in New Haven, the same year, to one-ninth; in New York, to one-fourth; in Philadelphia, to one-eleventh. Now it cannot be true that there is such a great disproportion between the deaths by this disorder in Boston and New York, and those in New Haven and Philadelphia.

We heartily echo the wish in the concluding paragraph, though the association of facts, (one of which is not invariably true, that of the precious metals,) may be considered as partaking too much of fancy.

' History and observation justify the remark that while
' the movements of conquest have been from the north to
' the south, and the course of the precious metals from the
' west to the east; that the progress of the ocean and of
' the atmosphere, of the arts and sciences, and of the civil-
' ization of the human species, has been from the rising to
' the setting sun: and, according to the uniform experience
' of mankind, we have every reason to believe that our
' country will be the chosen seat, and favourite abode, of
' learning and science. May this association be a humble
' instrument in paving the way for this sublime result; and
' may posterity describe its origin, its progress, and its ma-
' turity, by adopting, with a small variation, the language of
' the roman bard:

' "Mobilitate viget, viresque acquirit eundo:

' Parva metu primo; mox sese attollit in auras,

' Ingrediturque solo, et caput inter nubila condit."

' ÆNEID, lib. iv.'

‡ It grew strong by exertion, and acquired strength in its
' progress: small at first, through diffidence, it soon sprung
' up into the sky, spread over the earth, and hid its tower-
ing head in the heavens.'